

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on these two very important conservation bills. I am Christine Wolf, Director of Government and International Affairs for The Fund for Animals, a national animal protection organization with more than 200,000 members and supporters nationwide. I am also the Vice Chair of the Bushmeat Crisis Task Force, a coalition of scholars, wildlife biologists, field researchers, and conservation organizations dedicated to mitigating the commercial bushmeat trade in Africa. My testimony is also endorsed by The Humane Society of the United States, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Earth Island Institute, The Ark Trust, Inc., the International Primate Protection League, and the Doris Day Animal League, collectively representing 8.7 million Americans.

The Fund for Animals congratulates Congressman Saxton and Congressman Miller for introducing the Keystone Species Conservation Act and the Great Ape Conservation Act because by doing so they have elevated the level of dialogue regarding the plight of our planet's dwindling species. In the past decade, congress has enacted legislation creating the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund, the African Elephant Conservation Fund, and the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund. There is no doubt about the success of these funds or the impact they have made on field projects around the globe. With modest appropriations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has awarded grants to programs that are improving security for elephants in areas of intense poaching, assisting in tiger population studies, and expanding breeding opportunities for the critically endangered Sumatran rhino. The United States is clearly poised to be a leader in the realm of endangered species conservation and the popular adoption of the preceding acts reflects the will of the American people to reverse the decline of so many important species.

The current question being pondered by congress is whether to continue down the path of creating species-specific funds or to establish a multi-species fund that is designed to address the needs of many different animals. The arguments for each option are meritorious; however The Fund for Animals cautions against any approach that makes them mutually exclusive. Because both H.R. 3407 and H.R. 4320 are drafted in the interest of furthering in-situ conservation efforts, The Fund for Animals is fully supportive of both bills. That being stated, we have some concerns about the ability of a multi-species conservation fund to address certain taxa in need of focused, urgent protection.

While there are several species that may be well served by a multi-species fund, there are certain species whose populations are declining at such a rapid pace that they desperately need the focused attention of a single species fund. Great apes are just such a group. Throughout their range in Africa and Southeast Asia, chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos and orangutans are disappearing due to habitat destruction, the bushmeat trade, and impact from logging operations. The crisis facing great apes is immediate, it is extreme, and it is

worthy of the individual attention provided by the Great Ape Conservation Act.

We are also concerned about the likelihood that a keystone species fund would not be appropriated enough money by congress to address the many species it strives to assist. In such instances, it is highly likely that the critical population declines of species such as the great apes would be lost in the shuffle of the many deserving grant applications received by keystone species fund administrators. Primarily for that reason, The Fund for Animals encourages the adoption of the Great Ape Conservation Act in its entirety, or if it is folded into the keystone species bill, that it be given its own title within the bill and a more assured chance of consistent funding.

One of the most striking examples of the immediate threats facing great apes is the current situation in the Congo Basin of Africa. Ravaged by civil war and overexploitation of natural resources, the fragile ecosystems in this region and the species that depend on them are destined for extirpation if relief efforts are not mobilized as soon as possible. Mountain Gorillas remain only in small pockets of forest in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The most recent population survey of these animals estimated their numbers at a scant 620, and many primatologists feel that this is an insufficient number of animals to constitute a viable gene pool.

Of course Mountain gorillas have become the poster species for conservation in the Central African rainforest due to their appearance in big screen movies and the very widely recognized work of Dian Fossey, but we should never discount their importance to the area in which they remain. Gorilla tourism, a once prospering enterprise, holds on precariously in Uganda, the only Mountain gorilla range country not consumed by civil strife. Through the ecotourism company with which I'm associated, I have spent much time in that region and I can tell you with absolute certainty that the quality of life shared by the people who live amongst the Mountain gorillas depends heavily on the hard currency brought in by foreign visitors. Exactly two months ago I visited several primary schools in Southwest Uganda and saw the real effects of tourism dollars on their quality of education. Living on the edge of a national park where gorilla tourism is the highest earning economic activity, these schools enjoy more teaching staff, better supplies, and a more modernized infrastructure than schools located further away from the parks. The uncertainty of the Mountain gorilla's survival is a threat that is all too well recognized by the villagers who depend on tourism revenue. For their part, they are actively protecting the gorillas, but they have access to only a small corner of their habitat. Just across the border from where tourists enjoy watching the Mountain gorillas, these animals are being poached for food and are caught in the crossfire of the civil unrest. The demise of the Mountain gorilla will spell an end to the livelihoods of the local people. In the Central African rainforest, protecting the gorilla is protecting the people. A fund established under the Great Ape Conservation Act could conceivably support programs such as the various cottage industries that revolve around gorilla tourism, and by doing so sustain the livelihoods of people who have little else to depend on.

In the same region, the Eastern lowland gorilla is being detrimentally impacted by war and habitat destruction. Kahuzi-Biega National Park which lies along the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, contained approximately 247 Eastern lowland gorillas in 1996. The results of a survey conducted in late 1999 revealed that fewer than 70 animals remain. There are qualified conservationists and various NGOs in the region who stand ready and willing to do what is necessary to protect the remaining gorillas, but they are held back by a disorganized regional government and lack of resources. While peacekeeping efforts are most desperately needed at this time, the long-term survival of the Eastern lowland gorilla depends on projects which would benefit greatly from a Great Ape Conservation Fund.

These examples illustrate the dire need for focused attention on the plight of great apes through specific

congressional action. The Fund for Animals is aware that the existence of funding or merely "throwing money at the problem" is not a panacea. Conservation challenges are unique in their scope and variety and each must be approached with an appreciation of the individual circumstances. Funding, however, is always an excellent way to enhance the viability of existing projects, aid in the inception of new ones, and promote cooperation between similar endeavors. While the Keystone Species Conservation Act has the potential to make positive strides by advancing the conservation of potentially thousands of foreign threatened and endangered species, by its very nature it could not adequately address the needs of great apes to the same degree as an act focused specifically on them. In the recent past, congress has not perceived conservation initiatives to be high priority items and we fear that if the Keystone Species Conservation Act were passed alone with the understanding that it would serve the needs of foreign species, it would come up short at appropriations time, further diluting the funds available for great ape conservation. That, coupled with the crisis facing great apes, has led us to the opinion that both bills should be passed, but not at the exclusion of each other.

I have attached a history of funding for the African Elephant, Asian Elephant, and Rhino and Tiger Conservation Funds to illustrate our concerns about the levels of congressional appropriations and the potential for a multi-species fund to be burdened with plenty of eligible grant applications and not enough money to fund them. Additionally, I have attached a population trend table for Kahuzi-Biega National Park which shows the level of devastation experienced by the Eastern lowland gorilla and the immediacy of the crisis in that region.

In conclusion, The Fund for Animals expresses its complete support for both H.R. 4320 and H.R. 3407. We feel strongly that the conservation challenges surrounding great apes are severe enough to warrant the establishment of a funding mechanism devoted to them, or an earmark in a multi-species bill that protects funding for them.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to working with the committee to make these bills as successful as they can be.

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